

# Ideas to improve accountability for Education in Vermont

Vermont's pre-K through 12 education system has traditionally shown good outcomes, sustained small school environments, and provided fiscal equity for lower income districts.

However, there are significant challenges: Vermont's educational system is highly decentralized and administratively heavy which creates inherently higher cost. The majority of any school's funding is not controlled by local boards making accountability difficult at the local level. Local and state officials cannot completely explain the funding process due to its complexity. The aging demographics of our state have resulted in declining enrollments and an older taxpayer population.

Vermont's student/teacher ratio is 11:1, while the national average is 15:1. If the national average could be achieved this would result in over \$100 million in savings in the Education Fund. Reducing the number of supervisory districts from the current 62 to 16 is estimated to save an additional \$35 million. Together, these changes could result in a 10% savings in the current budget of \$1.3 billion. Reductions in the state's grand list, and therefore education revenues, are expected due to recent economic factors. Savings may be essential to ensure the future stability and quality of education.

A significant number of school administrators and teachers will retire in the next few years providing an opportunity to achieve reductions through attrition and avoiding layoffs. Administrator and teacher shortages could also be problematic in the future based on the low ratios system-wide and national trends, making the time opportune to consider such changes.

The state's property tax assistance program is the fastest growing expense to the Education Fund: it has ballooned to 11% of revenues in an attempt to control tax burdens. State assistance payments are not equitably distributed due to the formula based on income. Savings of \$20-30 million are possible by reforming the program which could adequately support annually required contributions to the teacher's pension.

Due to significant increases in property taxes, taxpayers have sought answers to questions surrounding cost, efficiencies and accountability, which have led to discussions regarding governance of our schools. Business people, educators, taxpayers and lawmakers have brought good ideas to the forefront to address the issues of cost or accountability, but none have been fully embraced as a whole solution in an effort to maintain educational quality at lower costs, despite the future cost and demographic pressures.

This overview brings many of these ideas together to suggest significant changes to transform education and provide greater accountability to the taxpayers. The changes proposed aim to create alignment with US Department of Education goals and greater educational opportunities for students to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, while preserving our proud tradition of local control.

1. **All school districts associated with a technical education center would be governed by a district board.** District board members could be elected to represent towns now associated with current supervisory unions or districts, on a pro-rata basis by population determined by the legislature. The district superintendent and staff would be employed by the district board.
2. **School administrators would have advisory councils to provide input on important school-level management issues.** The school-level advisory councils would provide a way for the school administration (principals) to maintain a tie to the local community, receive input from parents and community members and provide planning support. The advisory council could be appointed or elected. The school administration would be responsible, with the help of the advisory council, for achieving standards and goals, reviewing curricula, personnel decisions and developing the school's budget for approval at the district level.

3. **District boards would oversee public schools in the district.** The district would be responsible for education accountability, financial operations, conduct contract negotiations, general operations and special education (in conjunction with the Department of Education in certain circumstances). The district would manage compliance with the law and education standards, renovation/construction, transportation, grants and federal programs, and quality measures. The district would work with the Commissioner of Education to develop standards and goals through long term planning that would align with the state education plan and report performance to the Commissioner. The district would have authority over public schools only, but would act as the fiduciary for town tuition payments to approved independent schools.
4. **Educational opportunity would be available within the district.** Educational opportunity is currently available in a limited way. Access to more educational options would provide impetus for specialization of high schools and the creation of centers of educational excellence. Educational opportunity would include public, approved independent schools and college coursework for eligible high school students. School enrollment requests outside the district might be approved by the district, and appealed to the Commissioner of Education if denied by the district.
5. **Transportation and scheduling changes would enhance educational opportunity.** Changes to transportation systems by creating a transit hub at the technical center and adjusting the start time of the high school day would enable all students to participate in region-wide opportunities. Transportation for elementary students presents a greater challenge. However, if developed as a cooperative among schools more closely located within a district it could work as a closed loop system. This could be accomplished with smaller vehicles that would be safer (seat belts) and more fuel efficient than the bus fleet.
6. **The Department of Education would manage and fund all special education needs in each district.** The Department could manage cases by working with parents and the district to provide expertise for education of such students whose needs exceed certain criteria and/or expenditures. This would shield the district from decision-making in very difficult cases, potentially avoid fiscal and legal challenges to the district, yet provide services at the local level whenever possible.
7. **The state may provide significant incentives for regions to form districts.** Significant incentives, such as a \$2 million technology grant and/or preferential access to ARRA funding would be helpful in encouraging districts to collaborate; a completion date for regional district formation might also be helpful.
8. **District boards would form relationships with higher education resources.** Such relationships would result in high school students earning college credit or by taking college courses as part of the high school curriculum. The state could provide the cost of one college entrance exam to each student to encourage participation in higher education, and fund a specialized guidance counselor for college guidance in each high school.

**Other notes or ideas to consider:**

- If the state desires achieving greater student: teacher ratios in order to bend the curve on education spending trends it would be best accomplished on a region-wide basis to avoid harm to small schools in remote areas.
- Centers of education excellence would be the likely outcome of using an entire region's resources to provide student-centered educational options, which may provide unique options for small schools as specialized centers.
- Changes at the regional level may prompt subsequent changes in governance at the state level to facilitate transformation by creating an Agency of Education led by a Secretary of Education.